



ExCASES Mission

# Seeing the Forest for the Deer

A participatory process to support stakeholder  
collaboration in landscape-scale deer management



University  
of Exeter



National Trust



Natural  
Environment  
Research Council



**RENEW is a five-year partnership programme to develop solutions to one of the major environmental challenges for humankind: the renewal of biodiversity.**

We are in a biodiversity crisis. A million species of plants and animals are threatened with global extinction, and wildlife populations across much of the planet have been dramatically reduced. This is of profound concern because biodiversity underpins human existence. RENEW is working, with a sense of urgency, to reshape understanding and action on biodiversity renewal across scales, creating knowledge, and influencing national institutions, communities and individuals. Our focus is on a 'people-in-nature' approach, reflecting the two-way, dynamic relations between people and nature and the need to develop a relational approach to renew our life-support systems.

Funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), the programme is a collaboration between the University of Exeter and the National Trust, and has been co-designed and developed with over 30 partners from a diverse range of sectors. RENEW is led by Professors Krasimira Tsaneva-Atanasova, Kevin Gaston, and Catriona McKinnon from the University of Exeter, and Professor Rosie Hails from the National Trust.

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## **List of participating organisations & individuals**

British Association for Shooting and Conservation, Country Food Trust, FareShare, Feedback Global, Forestry Commission, Forest Research, National Trust, Natural England, private landowners and independent ecologists (deer management consultants; landowner/farmer; stalker/archaeologist; environmental educator; wildlife veterinarian/deer welfare specialist), RENEW, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), South Downs National Park Authority, Sussex area Ward Councillors (Goodwood and Arundel), Sussex Wildlife Trust, Sussex Woods Deer Management Pilot, The Countryside Charity (CPRE), University of Exeter, University of Reading (iDeer project), West Sussex County Council.

## **Seeing the Forest for the Deer**

**A participatory process to support stakeholder collaboration in landscape-scale deer management**

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**Executive**

**summary**

# 0. Executive summary

The growth in the number and distribution of native and introduced deer populations is having a detrimental impact on biodiversity, ecological restoration, climate change initiatives, and deer welfare in many parts of the UK (see [Figure 3](#)). 'Seeing the Forest for the Deer' aimed to **support stakeholders in more effectively framing, co-ordinating, and developing shared deer management objectives**. The ExCASES team focused on engaging and drawing expertise from a diverse range of stakeholders to understand better what a landscape-scale approach to deer management could look like in practice. We employed a structured, participatory and deliberative process based around a series of Workshops in a region where deer management challenges were particularly acute and complex, yet innovative and collective solutions were actively being sought. By including participants who were not traditionally included in deer management (such as food justice and redistribution organisations, local councillors, academics and educators, animal welfare and countryside experts), the aim was to engage a broader range of voices to identify and explore the barriers and opportunities of taking a more holistic and collaborative approach towards landscape-scale management of deer in the UK.

The Workshop series provided a valuable forum for different stakeholders to understand each other's worldviews, priorities, values and perspectives towards deer management. Facilitated, creative activities democratised input from the participants and provided a supportive space for sharing views and information, while allowing for the expansive, aspirational thinking that is key to identifying progressive and novel solutions.

This report, based on the outcomes of these Workshops, makes eight recommendations to support deer- and land-managers in developing new strategies and collaborative pathways, which are elaborated further in [Section 5](#). We present sector-specific recommendations in [Figure 1](#).

## **1 Individuals and organisations involved in managing deer<sup>1</sup> should adopt a holistic, community-orientated framing and approach, which emphasises the interconnectedness of people and nature.**

Deer management can be considered a 'keystone' nature renewal issue, meaning that a more holistic approach towards deer management could catalyse transformative change and deliver a cascade of benefits for biodiversity, climate change, ecosystem health and resilience, food sustainability, nature connection, and rural livelihoods. A community-orientated framing and approach, emphasising social and ecological resilience, could facilitate the establishment of shared objectives and responsibilities between stakeholders with diverse values.

<sup>1</sup> Individuals and organisations involved in managing deer are referred to as 'deer managing stakeholders' hereafter.



## **2 Deer managing stakeholders should embrace the value of diverse voices and practitioners.**

New advocates from outside the deer managing community are needed to diversify the discourse, strengthen the socio-economic outcomes, and broaden the range and appeal of messaging to people with different values. Different organisations are trusted partners and messengers for different communities, and working together can maximise reach and benefit. As deer populations and their movements are increasingly connecting rural and urban spaces, constructively bridging a perceived rural/urban divide is important. Furthermore, participants recognised that deer management can be an exclusionary space for women, young people, and people of colour to join and flourish within, which should be addressed.

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## **3 Deer managing stakeholders should engage and collaborate more widely with the food justice sector.**

Deer managers should foster new partnerships with food justice and redistribution organisations to help address questions of equity and access around deer management and venison, embedding deer management within wider societal objectives associated with food security and access to sustainable protein.

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## **4 Stakeholders should share data and promote wider use of (and access to) evidence and experiential knowledge via a dedicated platform.**

Mixed methods that provide data on deer populations, impacts, and outcomes, are required to evidence and justify the rationale for deer management at landscape-scales, and to build trust in deer managing operations. Deer managers require data on deer populations and cull returns to evidence management decisions, forecast venison supply flows for venison processors, and co-ordinate more effective landscape-scale deer management interventions. Policy makers, public representatives, and community leaders require data-based evidence to be able to advocate for and support deer management. An independently hosted, open-source database should be created that facilitates the collation of anonymised data on deer populations and cull returns, overcoming the current trust issues associated with returning and sharing cull data with statutory bodies.



## **5 Networks should be established and evolve to embrace new sectors and collaborators.**

Workshop participants wanted to see new networks develop, and existing networks adapt, to: organise around shared principles; integrate different knowledges (scientific and experiential); promote inclusion and collaborations between different disciplines and sectors; cross-fertilise different organisations' initiatives through data sharing and systematic planning; highlight joint funding opportunities; and provide facilitation guidance and resources. Coalitions of stakeholders, representative of a broad spectrum of socio-ecological interests, could create compelling win-win cases for local authority and government support.

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## **6 It is important to build better trust between organisations, and with wider publics.**

More diverse coalitions, representative of a broader range of sectoral interest beyond those of large, well-established, land-managing organisations, could help to build trust between diverse stakeholders and wider publics. This is required to more fully and rapidly engage resilient, collaborative delivery pipelines.

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## **7 Deer managing stakeholders need to take a joint ownership approach to communications.**

Joint communications provide a more coherent, shared narrative; attenuate the perceived risk of negative public/membership responses for any one organisation; increase public confidence in the integrity of messaging; and provide a unified position and more compelling case for support from policy makers.

We provide a set of statements and principles, developed by stakeholders in our Workshops, that can be used by organisations in their communications (summarised in [Box 1](#)).

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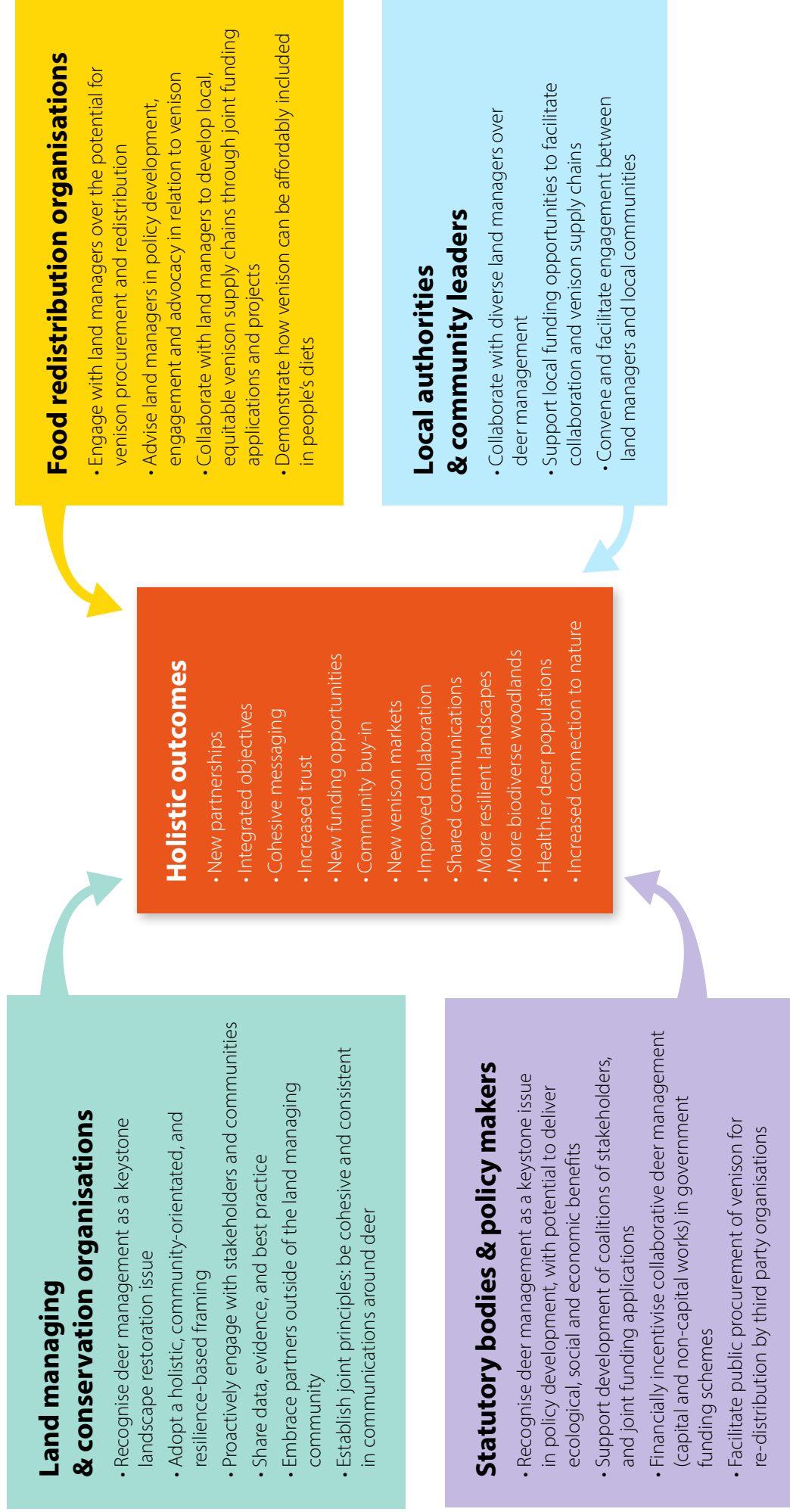
## **8 Public policy should facilitate and incentivise collaborative deer management.**

There should be greater connectivity between public policies and initiatives to support landscape-scale deer management and venison supply chains. New funding is particularly needed to support non-capital works such as public engagement, facilitation, data management, and leadership training. This would improve capacity for deer managers to readily deliver products into 'new' supply chains without significantly detracting from their primary focus of practical management.



## **Box 1** Principles for use in joint communications between organisations around deer management

- 1** The management of deer populations to sustainable levels – where vegetation and trees can periodically establish and flourish without protection – is important for dynamic nature renewal and climate change mitigation.
- 2** People have coexisted with, and managed, deer populations in Britain for millennia. Evidence-based, proactive deer management is important to support diverse, resilient ecosystems through regulating the abundance and distribution of herbivore pressure.
- 3** Deer management includes a suite of options including non-lethal methods, such as the use of fencing and tree guards (which may be appropriate in some scenarios). Evidence-based culling, by trained professionals following best practice guidelines, is an important and necessary part of deer management.
- 4** There is broad agreement amongst land managers that, in places, a reduction in deer numbers through culling is necessary.
- 5** Deer are a valued part of our ecosystems, and at sustainable densities (that allow the regeneration of plants and trees) can enhance and diversify woodland landscapes.
- 6** Deer management strives to achieve an equitable and sustainable coexistence between people and deer that enables nature renewal.
- 7** The welfare of deer is a priority for deer management, and effective deer management supports the overall health of deer populations.
- 8** Wild venison is a quality product of positive environmental management/stewardship. A more accessible wild venison supply chain could be part of a dietary transition that supports local, sustainable, healthy and just food provision.
- 9** Taking a community-orientated approach allows us to highlight the wider socio-cultural benefits that sustainable deer management can provide.
- 10** The focus of deer management has changed over time, becoming a key objective for conservation initiatives and evidence-based land management.



**Figure 1** What do these recommendations mean for your organisation?

# Introduction



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Mission parameters and purpose

ExCASES is part of the RENEW project – a Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) funded partnership between the University of Exeter and the National Trust that takes a ‘people-in-nature’ approach towards the challenges of biodiversity renewal. The role of ExCASES is to undertake agile work (which we term ‘missions’) on pressing biodiversity renewal issues. The work can consist of original research, participatory process, and the synthesis of existing knowledge, with the aim of creating impactful outputs for real change. The ExCASES approach is based on collaboration across disciplines and sectors, co-design with stakeholders, and agile delivery. This report is one of the outputs from ExCASES’s mission, ‘Seeing the Forest for the Deer’.

‘Seeing the Forest for the Deer’ employed a structured, participatory and deliberative process, which was designed to engage diverse voices in identifying and exploring the barriers and opportunities to a more holistic and collaborative approach towards landscape-scale management of deer in the UK. The ExCASES team focused on engaging expertise from a diverse range of stakeholders to explore this topic. The University of Exeter, National Trust, Forest Research, and the Forestry Commission were involved from the earliest stage in helping to develop the mission’s focus. This report outlines the mission process, synthesises and presents information gathered from a series of three stakeholder Workshops, and makes recommendations based on these findings. The mission’s outputs seek to support stakeholders in more effectively framing, co-ordinating, and developing shared deer management objectives.





## 1.2 Background

The growth and distribution of deer populations in the UK is, in many places, having a detrimental impact on biodiversity (Ramirez *et al.*, 2018; Spake *et al.*, 2020), nature renewal initiatives, efforts to tackle climate change (such as tree planting), and deer welfare (Llywodraeth Cymru/Welsh Government, 2017). There can also be socio-economic costs for people, such as disease transmission, damage to crops and road traffic collisions (Böhm *et al.*, 2007; Langbein, 2019; Pepper, *et al.*, 2019; Scottish Environment LINK, 2020). The spread and severity of these impacts is forecasted to increase, with statutory bodies and many land-managing stakeholders perceiving that population management of deer through lethal control (culling) is a necessity (Forestry Commission England 2004; Deer Working Group 2020; Kirkland *et al.*, 2021). There are also other, non-lethal ways of managing deer and their impacts, including using tree guards to protect saplings, and fencing to exclude deer.

Deer management is currently the responsibility of individual landowners, with devolved governments having little (Scotland) or no regulatory powers (England, Wales and Northern Ireland). Landscape-scale management approaches are necessary as deer readily move across land ownership boundaries, and species such as fallow deer, which herd together in large groups, can roam many miles between refuge areas and feeding sites, and change their habitat use seasonally (Thirgood, 1995). Frameworks such as regional Deer Management Groups (Fiorini *et al.*, 2011; Deer Management Group Map – ADMG (deermanagement.co.uk)) have in some cases been successful in co-ordinating deer management at a larger scale. However, effective delivery often requires collaboration which can be challenging because it requires sustained and co-ordinated efforts across large areas. This frequently involves multiple actors, each with their own motivations and land management objectives (Fiorini *et al.*, 2011; Davies & White, 2012; Kirkland *et al.*, 2021). This is especially complex in areas where there is a high density of land ownership with a diversity of land management objectives (e.g., southern England).

Deer management can also be a contested issue due to the multiple ways that people value deer and understand their socio-ecological effects (Dandy *et al.*, 2011; Dandy *et al.*, 2012; Kirkland *et al.*, 2021; Hare *et al.*, 2021; Pollock *et al.*, 2022). These factors can prevent or limit delivery of positive outcomes for a range of environmental and societal benefits. One of these potential benefits is perceived to be the provision of venison. However, this too can be a divisive topic. In the UK, hunting and venison are seen by some as associated with sport, wealth and class, raising questions around wider accessibility and equity (Macmillan, 2000). This connects deer management with broader discussions on land access/ownership, fair governance of commons resources, and food sovereignty (defined by six key principles: providing food for people; valuing food providers; localising food systems; centring local control; building knowledge and skills; and working with nature. Land Workers Alliance 2021).

### 1.3 Research gap and key aims

ExCASES investigated whether the management of deer populations could and/or should be embedded within broader land use and societal objectives. The team sought to explore the challenges and opportunities of taking a more collaborative and holistic approach to managing deer, drawing on expertise and input from a range of stakeholders to build on existing recommendations for facilitating collaboration (e.g., Davies & White, 2012; Forest Research 2022).

By gathering different voices and facilitating discussions, we aimed to:

- Increase the awareness and understanding of different perspectives on deer management objectives, priorities and barriers to joined-up approaches.
- Find new pathways towards effective collaboration.
- Develop meaningful outputs that support best practice and build upon existing recommendations.



**Figure 2** Participants at Workshop 1 discuss their visions for the future of human-deer coexistence in the UK.

# Methodology



## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Methodological approach

Our core methods were documentary analysis and participatory Workshops. The former involved a desk study of the academic, grey literature, and policy documents to provide an up-to-date understanding of the issues surrounding deer management. We supplemented this process with scoping conversations with 12 deer management experts across Scotland and England, which also helped us to identify potential participants, and design the framing and content of Workshop activities.

From this foundation, we conducted a series of facilitated participatory Workshops to engage participants in a structured and deliberative process to share information and experiences, with the aim of achieving new insights and increased awareness of different stakeholders' worldviews, needs and develop ideas about the ingredients for successful collaboration in landscape-scale deer management.

Three Workshops and one immersive evening event provided a facilitated space where participants could: explore different perspectives on deer management; contribute their views and experience; share information; discuss the ways deer management is framed; and seek consensus over issues, visualising pathways towards overcoming them.

We used a flexible and iterative methodology that adapted over the course of the process in response to the inputs of different participants and co-designing organisations. We used a mixed-method, qualitative approach to help uncover the technical, socio-economic, cultural and institutional complexities surrounding deer management at landscape-scale. By collecting and analysing primary and secondary sources of data using a variety of methods we sought to enrich participant's understandings about the barriers and opportunities to achieving more equitable and holistic landscape-scale collaboration. Taking this approach also adheres to the principle of triangulation, which 'entails using more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena' (Bryman 2004: 275).

Notes and audio recordings were taken during Workshop activities, and data was written up into a combination of note and transcript format. This fed into an empirically-grounded, thematic analysis, which generated the core emergent themes and guided the co-production of subsequent Workshop content. Thematic analysis was considered suitable because of the flexibility, theoretical freedom and descriptive possibilities it offered (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Our approach included both inductive and deductive elements, as data was informed partly by the specific questions and framings we provided to Workshop participants, but also by the views and experiences shared by participants.





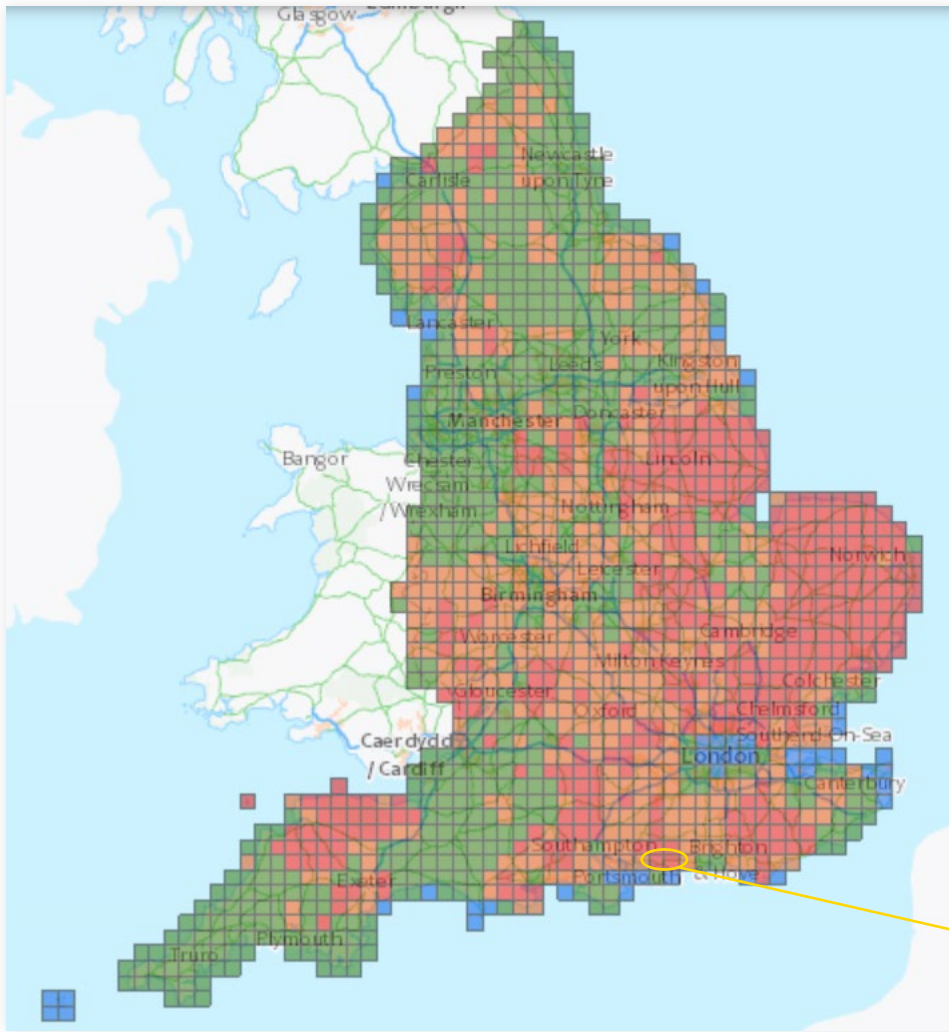
## 2.2 Mission design

### 2.2.1 The ExCASES approach

The design and delivery of this mission was led by a team of three Postdoctoral Research Fellows (PDRFs), based on the RENEW project, who were accountable to the two Leads/Co-Investigators of the ExCASES team, Professor Matthew Heard (Head of Environmental Research and Data at the National Trust) and Dr Sarah Crowley (Senior Lecturer in Human and Animal Geography at the University of Exeter). Our approach was informed by our positionality, both as a research unit and as individuals with different backgrounds, socio-cultural identities and lived experiences. While the National Trust (NT) is a large landowning heritage and conservation NGO, which manages deer on its estates, it is also an Independent Research Organisation (IRO). The project was therefore subject to ethical review by the Faculty of Environment, Science and Economy, Cornwall Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter. The PDRFs have a range of professional backgrounds and some preexisting relationships with conservation and voluntary sector networks that provided baseline trust for participant involvement. As a team with different disciplinary backgrounds, we all approached the mission from different academic positions, which was occasionally challenging but ultimately enabled us to combine our varied methodological preferences in unique ways.

### 2.2.2 Location of the mission

The mission was based in the vicinity of the South Downs National Park (Figure 3). This gave us some geographical parameters for the invitation of private landowners/managers, local branches of large conservation organisations (e.g., National Trust and The Wildlife Trusts), and representatives of community voices, even while we explored deer management at a UK-wide scale. It also provided a focal point for discussing the complexity of deer management, as many examples could be drawn from the immediate area and local network of stakeholders. The South Downs was chosen for several reasons: the presence of several National Trust estates who were taking different, sometimes contradictory, approaches to deer management; the density of people, since this area is highly populated in urban and peri-urban areas; the region being the base for a deer management pilot study led by Natural England, which was taking some innovative approaches; the prevalence of deer population impacts on habitats and food crops; and logistical accessibility.



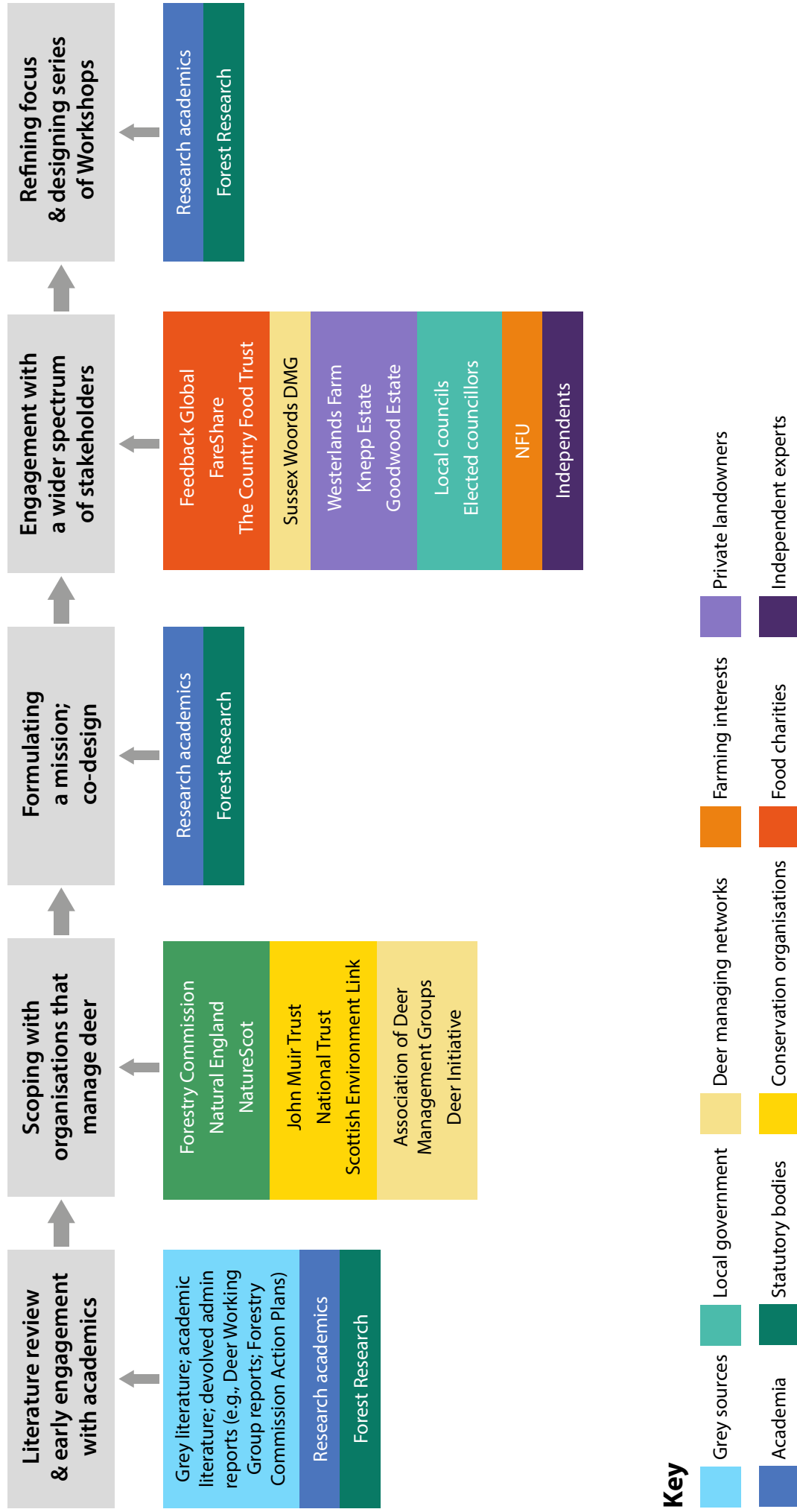
**ExCASES Deer Mission:  
South Downs National Park**

**Figure 3** A map of indicative deer risk to woodland in England where red is highest risk (produced by the Forestry Commission 2023). The ExCASES mission was geographically based around the National Trust's Slindon Estate in the South Downs National Park.

### 2.2.3 Stakeholder mapping and relationship building

Identifying and building trusting relationships with a broad range of stakeholders was necessary to understand the topic from a wide array of perspectives, but also to facilitate the authentic involvement of diverse participants. We mapped out a wide range of national and local stakeholders to try and ensure a balanced and diverse number of these 'key perspectives' were represented (specific organisations, groups and individuals are summarised in [Appendix 2](#)). Some of the stakeholders identified either did not respond or were unable to engage due to the restricted timeframe of the process and/or organisational capacity. From April-June 2023, we held a stakeholder engagement process prior to designing and delivering the Workshops ([Figure 4](#)). Scoping conversations were held with the stakeholders highlighted by an asterisk in [Appendix 2](#). These were guided by a set of questions to explore deer management priorities, approaches, strengths, challenges, areas for development, and to identify existing collaborative initiatives and identify wider stakeholders. Notes were taken and written up in full directly afterwards. This scoping process ensured the mission was guided by and accountable to practitioners; identified gaps we could speak to and areas that required sensitivity or caution; and generated buy-in to the process from diverse stakeholders.





**Figure 4** The mission's scoping and co-design process, highlighting the input at different stages from organisations across a spectrum of stakeholder interest. Colours represent groups of key perspectives identified in the mapping process (see [Appendix 2](#) for more detail).

## 2.3 Mission delivery

**The overarching question of our participatory process was:** what does a collaborative and holistic landscape approach to deer stewardship, that engages and draws expertise from diverse stakeholders, look like in practice?

We utilised tools from participatory research methods to structure the Workshops (see [Appendix 1](#)). Workshops 1 and 2 had the same structure, which we ran with two different groups of participants. Workshop 3, and the evening event before it, brought the two groups and some additional voices together. Stakeholders who participated in the participatory Workshops are indicated in [Table 1](#), which reports stakeholder representation at each stage of the Workshop series.

The facilitated activities with participants in Workshops 1 and 2 produced a wealth of insight and information which the team synthesised and organised into emergent themes. These themes ranged from conceptual, long-term aspirations, to more tractable, short-term objectives. A thematic summary from Workshops 1 and 2 was produced and shared with Workshop participants prior to the third Workshop. This summary provided the foundation and basis for the activities and group discussions in Workshop 3. The emphasis of Workshop 3 was to consolidate the learning from the first two Workshops, and to work with the emergent themes to explore the potential for their realisation. The Workshop activities were designed and facilitated so that there was a specific focus on identifying tangible pathways towards achieving participant's aspirations for human-deer coexistence and management in the future.



**Figure 5** Participants at Workshop 3 taking part in the 'deer unmaking' event.

**Table 1** Representation and contributions for each element of the participatory process.

<b>Spread of representation/contribution from participants (W= Workshops)</b>				
<b>Participating Organisation / Institution / Individual</b>	<b>Process Elements</b>			
	<b>W1</b>	<b>W2</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>W3</b>
Natural England (inc. Sussex Woods Pilot)	1	1	3	3
Forestry Commission	2		2	2
National Trust	2	2	2	2
University of Exeter / RENEW	1	1	2	2
FareShare	1		1	1
Westerlands Estate	1		1	1
Norfolk Estate		1		
Goodwood Estate		1		2
Arundel Ward	1		1	1
Goodwood Ward	1		1	1
West Sussex Country Council	1			
Independent – Woodcraft Education Practitioner 1	1			
Independent – Ecologist	2			
CPRE: The Countryside Charity		1	1	1
Feedback Global		1	1	1
Sussex Wildlife Trust		1	1	1
Woodland Trust		1		1
South Downs National Park				1
iDeer (University of Reading)			1	1
Independent – Environmental Dialogue Broker			1	1
Independent – Wildlife Veterinarian			1	1
The Country Food Trust			1	
British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC)				1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Total number of participating organisations</b>	<b>19</b>			
<b>Total number of different participants (individuals)</b>	<b>32</b>			
Invited but unable to attend any elements: Knepp Estate, University of Bangor, Forest Research, National Farmers Union (NFU), Land Workers Alliance (LWA), RSPB, Common Ground Initiative, Independent Hunter, Independent Deer Manager, Brighton and Hove Food Partnership, Adur and Worthing Council				



**Key**

**findings**

## 3. Key findings

**The following sections report what participants perceived, discussed, and suggested during our Workshops. Quotes from participants are italicised.**

### **3.1 A holistic and community-orientated framing is important to promote wider participation in deer management.**

Deer population issues are seen as symptomatic of wider ecological, social, economic and political interactions. The increasing number of deer and their impact on ecosystems is perceived as an anthropogenic issue indicative of climate change, species introductions (e.g., muntjac deer), degraded ecological systems (lack of predators; conversion of habitats to other uses), and historically uneven power dynamics in land and resource management (e.g., maintaining high numbers of deer for private sporting or their aesthetic value). As an academic pointed out,

*“This is a human problem that needs a human solution, and we have been neglecting the duty to manage this issue and the moral obligation to manage these populations” (Academic).*

During the second Workshop, there was broad agreement that deer population management can be conceptualised as a ‘keystone’ issue, meaning that a more holistic approach towards deer management could catalyse transformative change, delivering a cascade of benefits for climate change mitigation objectives, biodiversity renewal, ecosystem health and resilience, food sustainability, nature connection, and rural livelihoods. There was also consensus that nesting deer management within a broader framework of landscape management could help build coalitions to overcome barriers. For example, deer management has proved less controversial when discussed within the context of farm clusters or as part of more holistically focussed landscape management objectives (Hare et al., 2021). As a councillor highlighted,

*“[many] residents will be opposed to the whole concept [of culling deer]. So if you start presenting numbers of deer killed, you are probably going to create problems, and some public backlash. Probably the safer way of doing it is to say, ‘this is how many tree saplings we have saved...it’s about habitat establishment.’ So it’s about goal setting and goal communication, rather than focusing on the method” (Councillor)*





### 3.1.1 Language and culture

When communicating and framing deer management, deer managing stakeholders must recognise the role of different worldviews, culture, and the legacy of anthropocentric values in land management, i.e., the framing of humans as being separate from and superior to other animals/nature (Washington *et al.*, 2017). An awareness of the emotive, and in some cases class-laden, connotations of different terminology (e.g., killing, hunting, stalking, culling, wildlife control and management), is required when engaging diverse public audiences and organisations (and internally within large, culturally diverse organisations). This was voiced by a conservation practitioner: ***“Within our own sector we talk our language. And the thing we are trying to find is a different language for the people outside”***. For example, among participants in our Workshops, ‘stewardship’ was perceived by many participants as perhaps more attractive than ‘management’ for most non-deer managing stakeholders, but for some deer managers it retained parochial, deterministic connotations (implying there is one ‘right’ objective, to the exclusion of alternative approaches/possibilities). Similarly, deer managers typically used ‘management’ to imply an evidence-based rationale, best practice, and professionalism, but for some non-deer managing stakeholders it was associated with an imposition of power, control, and a clinical, un-empathic relationship with deer. Another example was that deer managers strongly felt that improving the overall welfare of deer by reducing absolute numbers was a powerful rationale for communicating the need for management, and that deer welfare could be an emotive, tangible way to engage people. However, a public representative commented that a ‘culling is good for the deer’ message might not play well with publics who may be more concerned about the welfare of individual deer than population health more broadly.

Participants generally felt that UK citizens have a stake in effective deer population management, but that currently there is very little knowledge or interest in it. They agreed this could be helped by better defining biodiversity as a public good, and communicating deer management as a process that contributes towards protecting and enhancing public goods. There was also a feeling that public perception of deer stalking as an exclusive activity also needs addressing. While deer stalking remains a privileged activity in some cases, given barriers to entry, it was proposed that communications need to emphasise that deer management is also part of conservation and land management, and largely undertaken by rural workers. As a deer management advisor explained, ***“It’s a move away from sport stalking towards doing it for environmental benefit”***. However, some non-deer managing participants felt that there were alternative ways to manage the land to achieve biodiversity restoration and climate change mitigation objectives that do not involve culling deer such as increasing the extent of habitats to accommodate growing deer populations, diluting negative impacts). For some non-deer managing stakeholders, a justification for lethal management of deer that more clearly elucidates the impacts of deer on biodiversity, and addresses animal welfare concerns, is necessary (also see Cahoone, 2009).

### 3.1.2 Community-orientated framework for governance

Workshop discussions explored how viewing deer as a shared resource could provide some useful principles for a holistic governance framework (e.g., Caffentzis & Federici, 2014). The discussion was framed as an exploration of commoning, which is primarily about creating and maintaining relationships between people around the management of a commons resource – a resource that can provide benefit to society but is not owned by anyone in particular. Commoning emerged as a concept from one of the first Workshops and was attractive to some participants. However, the concept was problematic for others because of the varied interpretations and understandings of modern commons and commoning. Participants agreed that the core principles of commoning were desirable, but that the terms could cause confusion, with a representative of a statutory authority highlighting, **“There’s a danger that if you introduce a new phrase [for deer as a shared food resource] that it either gets adopted and it’s a great thing and everyone leaps on it and it’s fantastic – rewilding is a good example – or you lose people straight away”**. A consensus emerged that ‘community orientated’ was more appropriate, it being perceived as more readily understandable and acceptable. In our discussions, a community-orientated framing explicitly nested management within an overarching, wider imperative of supporting a broad range of species, habitats and people within a larger resilient, interconnected system; where people are part of nature, with both rights (to experience the benefits derived from healthy, biodiverse systems) and responsibilities (to support processes that protect and enhance those systems). Such a framing helps contextualise the need for collective action to address factors that undermine these objectives, such as managing deer populations.

UK wild deer are currently not largely managed as a ‘common’ resource and the distinction between the deer being ‘owned’ by everyone (*res communis*) or no-one (*res nullius*) can be considered “subtle” (Hansard 1996). In Scotland, where all wild animals have long been considered *res nullius*, it is well established that wild deer are ‘a shared resource for the people of Scotland’ and that the Scottish Government and Parliament have a responsibility to ensure their management is in the public interest. Despite this, it is landowners and managers who have the power to grant access to those who wish to hunt and utilise wild venison on their land in open season. This permission sometimes comes with training, mentoring, monitoring, logistical and technical support.

Greater quantities of high-quality, wild venison would be a clear outcome of a proactive, evidence-based management seeking to reduce deer populations to more sustainable levels. This increased supply could readily be directed to non-traditional recipients and markets. However, some participants felt that it would not be desirable to develop an extensive market infrastructure that relies on consistent venison provision, fearing that over-exploitation and profiteering would ensue (red, roe and fallow deer have historically experienced cycles of local and regional extinction in the UK due to over-exploitation). However, there is potential to link into community-directed supply chains targeted at feeding the most in need by providing access to lower cost, more sustainable protein. There are several examples where the principles of venison as a communal resource are already being applied to deer management (see [Appendix 4](#)), which could be replicated and/or scaled up. Small-scale private enterprise could also benefit from this approach if some of the profits of deer management are re-invested back into supporting collaboration and regulating infrastructure. From an investment perspective, a stronger economic case would need to be made to facilitate larger businesses to engage in, and support, such initiatives.



### 3.1.3 Barriers to community-based approaches

Although many participants found the community-based approach useful and largely desirable (perhaps more so for people not traditionally involved in land management), it was recognised that it may be alienating for some stakeholders. There is a risk that it could be associated with a ‘tragedy of the commons’ narrative, which assumes that more open access to a shared resource enables individuals to act in their own self-interest without considering the collective impact, resulting in harmful overconsumption and depletion (Ells, 2009). In some locations (such as the New Forest), a history of conflict and disagreement between ‘commoners’ (*sensu strictu*) and wider stakeholders, has led to negative interactions within local communities. Careful use of language around such initiatives was considered critical.



## 3.2 Food justice and venison supply chains need consideration in deer management strategies and practices

### 3.2.1 Connecting deer management with the food justice sector

Participants representing food justice/redistribution organisations highlighted the legacy of historical power inequalities, restricted land access, and private control of public goods as presenting barriers to collaborative action and participation. Consequently, some participants felt that a prevalent view amongst laypeople is that venison is the preserve of the rich and rural classes, and deer stalking as an exclusive sporting activity rather than conservation management. However, this position was strongly refuted by deer managing participants as being outdated.

Food organisations suggested that a localised venison economy, prioritising equitable access for local communities, could demonstrate an alternative to the industrialised farming and supermarket hegemony, and be part of a dietary transition that supports local, sustainable, healthy food provision. This ambition was broadly supported amongst the Workshop participants: ***“I think lots of the local food supply chains are helpful in actually making the practice more sustainable in the environment. So, while that goes against the large-scale supermarket approach, there could be value in keeping things local.”*** (Independent consultant). Participants agreed that increasing access to venison could serve as a gateway to engendering greater awareness and acceptability of deer management (creating a ‘virtuous circle’), normalising venison as an acceptable, safe, quality meat. Existing projects emphasising the historical context of deer management and venison consumption, such as the Dama International project (Sykes 2010; University of Nottingham, see [Appendix 4](#)), have approached the issue in this way, with apparent success.

In keeping with this idea, there was strong agreement that connecting deer management with food justice/charity sectors could lead to novel pathways for venison distribution and provision: ***“I totally agree that it would be great if more venison could go into charitable distribution”*** (Statutory Authority representative). It was pointed out that non-governmental and food distribution organisations can bypass traditional markets and accelerate access for some people, while potentially changing perceptions towards venison through positive messaging, sharing recipes, and engagement with recipient charities and end users. For example, The Country Food Trust procure, process, and re-distribute long-life venison products to foodbanks nationally, though they currently rely on gifted or significantly discounted carcasses, which deer managing stakeholders saw as a limitation: ***“The idea needs further development. You’re not going to get thousands of free deer”*** (Deer Manager). Food justice participants suggested that food redistribution charities can secure funding that is unavailable to land managing organisations, which could contribute to overcoming supply chain barriers (e.g., lack of larder and butchery facilities).

It was pointed out that regional initiatives involving novel, cross-sectoral partnerships, such as the Fair Game project (see [Appendix 4](#)), have the potential to procure and provide 'virtuous venison' to local businesses and communities. Following medieval principles of 'unmaking' (the ceremonial butchering of deer, and distribution throughout the community), the highest quality cuts would be supplied to small-scale retailers, supporting local businesses and the local economy. The remainder of the carcass would be processed into nonperishable items (such as mince, sausages and burgers) and distributed via organisations such as Fareshare and The Country Food Trust, as a local benefit of deer management. However, participants cautioned that this runs the risk of being perceived as charities only receiving off-cuts. A deer management policy representative highlighted that the UK Government's recent messaging has purportedly been that 'wild foods are outside of human consumption', while recommendations for increased utilisation of wild venison in the Government's Food Strategy (2022) became the focal point of ridicule amongst opposition MPs and commentators ([Government Food Strategy - Hansard - UK Parliament](#)).

### 3.2.2 Generating new markets and confidence in venison

Workshop participants highlighted potential opportunities beyond traditional markets, accessible through engagement with sustainability and food sovereignty agendas. Deer managers asserted that for commercially marketable venison and the re-distribution of venison via food banks, food safety mechanisms and traceability need to be in place, suggesting adherence to the British Quality Wild Venison Standard (BQWV) and Red Tractor standards. The BQWV standard for England, Wales and Northern Ireland is based on the Scottish Quality Wild Venison standard and aims to increase customer confidence in wild venison products by ensuring a set of standards are met throughout the supply chain, from point of shot through to end of processing. The Country Food Trust's model demonstrates that it is possible to procure and process venison to supply food banks while subscribing to necessary food safety standards. Participants perceived additional branding opportunities for venison as a positive product of conservation management. For example, Sussex Wildlife Trust endorse beef produced from cattle used in Nature Friendly Farming schemes and on their reserves.

### 3.2.3 Building venison supply capacity

Participants identified key problems within the venison supply chain, such as seasonal restrictions on hunting different deer species, lack of larders and processing capacity, lack of butchery skills, logistical capacity, and the fluctuating price of venison: ***"The number of deer shot is very much driven by venison price and whether people can get rid of it. When the price goes down then fewer deer are shot, and some people don't bother [shooting] at all"*** (Forestry Commission). These issues impact game dealers by creating inconsistency of supply; in the South Downs dealers are purportedly reluctant to take surplus carcasses in the winter due to storage limitations and a lack of additional demand for venison during a period when there is potentially excess supply (being open season for fallow, the main source of venison in the area). Currently, the incentive for game dealers to take surplus deer is missing and participants felt a better business case was needed to encourage game dealers to invest in the processing of venison, since demand drives supply: ***"Somebody's got to stand up and say we are getting closer to a shoot-to-waste situation because the various parts of the supply chain, the processing...the cost of running these businesses, the investment case – just isn't there"*** (Private Landowner).

Coalitions of organisations representative of cross-sectoral interests could more effectively work with policy makers to push for government support/funding of wild venison procurement and distribution (e.g., to food banks, hospitals, schools) by providing a more compelling case for multiple benefits. However, deer managing participants from Scotland cautioned that support for venison procurement must carefully avoid encouraging heavily centralised supply structures which tend to be monopolised by powerful suppliers, to the detriment of local businesses. Farmers need greater incentivisation to provide wild venison. Funding from agri-environment schemes could support farm businesses already carrying out deer management to protect crops, as well as encouraging farmers to collaborate on management with neighbours. Farm clusters are ideally situated to organise collaborative deer management if supported with monitoring capacity, the writing of deer management plans, co-ordinating management, establishing shared resources (e.g., larder, butchery and transport facilities), and co-ordinating supply to local game dealers or food charities and processors.

### 3.3 Sharing data and evidence is essential for effective deer management

#### 3.3.1 Deer management data requirements

Participants concluded that the kind of information they needed to facilitate effective management and collaboration depended on the needs and objectives of land managers, e.g., whether the purpose was to prevent crop damage, overbrowsing in woodland, or reduce road traffic collisions. Deer managing participants consistently expressed the immediate and urgent need for action. Despite not having as complete a picture as may be desirable (e.g., population abundance for different deer species in particular locations), managers felt they often have sufficient information to target and justify management at local scales. Some participants asserted that data based on impacts (readily observable to a trained eye), can act as an effective proxy for deer abundance, which is currently much harder to accurately determine. A statutory deer management advisor emphasised that the primary focus for planning management action should be habitat condition. Basing management decisions around the measuring and monitoring of deer impacts (e.g., vegetation surveys, sapling survival, tree damage), and changes to these impacts over time in response to management intensity, was seen as a more feasible way of guiding management decisions compared to monitoring deer population abundance. Deer managers suggested that guided field walks with direct observation of impacts, such as comparing deer browsing within and without deer exclosures, were especially helpful for communicating evidence-based management: **“Deer management should be objective and evidence led”** (Conservation Organisation).

Many participants believed evidence on deer abundance and population trends were important for establishing cull targets, evaluating management interventions, and monitoring population trends (also see Waeber *et al.*, 2013), as well as being helpful in forecasting venison supply patterns to enable more complete resource utilisation. Participants also perceived that establishing an evidence-based foundation for management was important for building trust, as without robust evidence, managers were vulnerable to accusations of a hidden agenda or abuse of power. Clearly defined roles and transparent management objectives were considered to be important, as some participants thought that managers were not clearly articulating what they were trying to achieve, how they intended to do it, and what a desirable result might look like (e.g., habitat community structure, desirable population levels, biodiversity targets, etc.). Private land-owning participants felt that a regularly updated, landscape-scale assessment of deer population densities was necessary, to enable local cull targets to be derived without the need for individual landowners to undertake costly assessments. This links to current research being addressed by the iDeer project (University of Reading) through their design of a web-based decision support tool (see [Appendix 4](#)).

### 3.3.2 Data collection

Deer managers reported that cull data is sparse, and there are trust issues associated with stalkers sharing their data with statutory bodies. Self-reporting on cull returns has been suggested but landowners are purportedly reluctant for several reasons. These include protectiveness over their 'patch'; concern about targeting by poachers; and fear of tax implications on carcasses, which are largely kept within a grey economy. Carcass tagging has been discussed - given that a carcass cannot officially be transported without a tag - but many carcasses do not enter formal supply chains.

Some participants have found drone surveys to be useful for measuring deer abundance, but there are issues with skill capacity, cost, co-ordination of surveys across multiple landowners, and securing permits. Deer Vehicle Collision data could be useful; the Forestry Commission encourages local authorities and insurers to collect this, but except for particular locations (such as Ashdown Forest), coverage is patchy. The Woodland Trust uses a combination of landscape deer population modelling and habitat impact assessments to plan management; and other participants believe this quantified, evidence-based approach helps foster public acceptability by evidencing management decisions, which are available for people to view (albeit on request). Heat pressure maps of impacts resulting from this approach create powerful, compelling images to win support for targeted management.





### 3.3.3 Sharing data and best practice

Some participants felt that Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (ENGOS) have historically been reluctant to share data with each other, though there are exceptions. Natural England's Sussex Woods deer management pilot project requires members to return cull data as a condition of supporting them to secure night licenses. Additionally, cull data is required as a condition of landowners receiving Countryside Grant Scheme Higher Tier funding (WD2: Woodland Improvement supplement). This data is collected, aggregated, and anonymised via the Sussex Woods project, and provides a replicable model for gathering data to support evidence-based decision making. This kind of aggregated data could be supplemented with context-specific, localised information to support community understanding about culling deer in their area: ***"having the same information available to everyone is a helpful way to break down barriers"*** (Independent Consultant).

Leadership is necessary to convene stakeholders, particularly where there are legacies of distrust. For deer managing participants, organisations would, ideally, openly share data on culling effort and cull returns. In practice, local contextual factors often mean there is a risk of public backlash and poaching. Local politics were cited as problematic, while legacies of distrust between landowners and statutory bodies/ENGOS, and between members of Deer Management Groups, prohibit the sharing of information in many cases. Distrust is often underpinned by a lack of shared environmental values; building a case based on socio-ecological scientific evidence and shared values could help identify areas of consensus, supporting negotiated objectives. Participants spoke of a loss of trust amongst landowners towards government institutions, with uncertainties around how data will be stored and used. This could be resolved by aggregating and anonymising data, such as demonstrated by the Sussex Woods Pilot. It was also suggested that the model developed by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (detailed in [Appendix 4](#)) could be adapted to enable people to anonymously report cull data.

Participants proposed establishing a new network or platform to enable more effective collaboration over landscape-scale deer management initiatives. It could include a database of anonymised data, which would be open source (transparent) and held by a respected, independent organisation (e.g., the National Biodiversity Network). Deer managing participants highlighted that numerous statutory organisations and NGOs have produced guidance for managing deer, and that there are existing platforms and collectives of stakeholders e.g., the Deer Initiative Ltd and the Association of Deer Management Groups. Some participants felt, however, that existing networks were subject to the influence of dominant, vested interests, and lacked independence, undermining trust.



### 3.4 Communication and engagement are important for building trust between organisations and with wider publics

#### 3.4.1 Building confidence through transparency and engagement

Participants perceived that transparency about deer management operations, practices and objectives was important for building trust and confidence with stakeholders and wider publics: ***“It would help if people could work together, and more transparently”*** (Private Landowner). It was suggested that creatively engaging with different communities, for example - using place-based approaches - could help stakeholders to explore different attitudes towards deer, deer management, and venison (e.g., with urban communities who have little access to the ‘hinterlands’ where most deer management currently takes place). There was a perceived need to connect what was often seen as a rural issue with a majority urban populace, who represent a potentially significant market for venison (and significant proportion of ENGO memberships). On the other hand, other participants believed that urban populations were generally unaware and/or did not care about deer management issues, therefore efforts should be concentrated towards rural communities who were directly affected.

There was consensus that engaging young people with nature and conservation issues was fundamental to increasing environmental awareness in the long term, and that deer managing stakeholders should engage communities in constructive and transparent ways by sharing information (a two-way process). There was a feeling there needed to be a shift from reactive to proactive engagement with local communities and organisations’ members about the rationale for deer management. This would build a shared understanding of the issues, establish trust, and grow confidence. Land managers could be bolder at convening groups beyond the deer managing community, e.g., demonstrating leadership by inviting community groups (schools, parish councils, organisation members) to view impacts and engage in biodiversity/woodland regeneration activities.

A concern of non-deer managing participants was the presence of people in the woods with guns, and linked to this, the concern that almost anyone could theoretically shoot deer. A code of conduct or best practice was perceived as necessary to allay people’s fears, especially in relation to deer welfare. Deer managing participants stressed there are very high standards, requirements, best practice and training for their stalkers – but this was not widely recognised outside of the deer managing community. Deer managers and stalkers operating on the ground could be better prepared and supported for increasing interactions with other users of shared spaces.

Some private landowners in the South Downs have been inviting school groups onto their land to teach children about woodland ecosystems, countryside management, and food chains. Their experiences suggest that children do not necessarily perceive deer as ‘Bambi’, as some people assume, but are interested and engaged in learning about the ecological role of deer within ecosystems. There was also agreement that lessons could be learned from what is already being done by archaeologists, historians, and other community practitioners to introduce cultural perspectives; elucidating the historical relationships between people, deer, food, and communities by highlighting that people have been interacting with and essentially managing deer for thousands of years (e.g., the Dama International project; Sykes et al., 2011). Deer and land managing participants recognised the value of wider engagement, transparency, inclusion and participation, while advocating for a balance with operational efficiency and safety. Additional support in terms of funding and facilitation resources were therefore required.

### 3.4.2 Reconnecting people with nature

A recurrent theme throughout the Workshop series was the legacy of separation of people from land and nature through processes of industrialisation, land enclosures, urbanisation and economic exclusion. These legacies are a strong contributor towards people's perceptions of disconnection from nature and rural traditions and a significant barrier to acceptance or support of deer management. Deer managing participants asserted that in ecosystems without top predators ('natural' herbivore regulation), people need to fulfil this role, so deer management is part of taking responsibility for an anthropogenic problem. Participants perceived a need to 're-enchant' people with and within nature, and with a more holistic framing, deer management could support this, as it depicts people as integrated within ecosystems and fulfilling positive ecological roles – providing a positive narrative at a time when most environmental narratives are of 'doom and gloom' (see Section 3.1): ***“Values [are] really important... fostering a deep understanding in young people [of] our place within nature rather than outside of it. The re-enchantment of the world is critical here”*** (Food justice representative).

Public understanding of ecology and ecosystems was unanimously perceived as an acute issue, particularly the effect of shifting baselines – where the condition of the environment in which people are brought up is assumed to be the norm – which mask the overgrazed/browsed state of many woodlands. Biodiversity is not a readily understandable or tangible concept for most people when talking about environmental management. 'Nature' is a more tractable concept. Participants reiterated that in the UK, most people are detached from land and the concept of hunting, and associate it with blood sport and privilege, rather than a culturally mainstream activity such as in Scandinavia and other parts of Europe.

Participants see the wider public as receptive to messaging regarding deer management within the context of biodiversity restoration, but communications around venison – killing and eating wild deer – can be a step too far in terms of what some organisations are comfortable with expressing publicly. A great majority of people will never have seen a deer, let alone have tried venison, and extensive engagement would be required (though not 'education', which was felt to have problematic connotations). Participants living locally in the South Downs commented that many residents had moved to the area recently from cities, and while some were enthusiastic to engage, there was often limited understanding of environmental management. Furthermore, it was expressed by many that the management of wildlife, particularly lethal control, had become an inflammatory topic, and staff across a number of wildlife managing organisations had received death threats, with certain communities vociferously opposing culling deer. As a result, deer management issues have tended to be 'danced around' by land managers and local authorities, rather than explicitly addressed in public discourse.

There was strong consensus that a joint communications piece across stakeholders, based on shared principles, would be hugely beneficial: ***“Most conservation organisations have similar goals – can we not work together – not only on conservation, but also on deer management...? It comes down to having the same messages to make it easier for all of us”*** (Conservation Practitioner). The Scottish Environment Link have suggested common principles, but a similar effort in England purportedly had little take up.



## **3.5 Appreciating and including diverse voices is key to unlocking more innovative and effective deer management pathways**

### **3.5.1 Diversity and inclusion**

There was a general perception that there has been an increasing convergence between landowners over the need to manage deer populations, and at local meetings, stalkers are talking more openly about collaboration. This emergent willingness to cooperate was purportedly being helped by the current Woodland Grants Scheme and advocacy by land agents and managers. It was also noted that Workshops (such as those carried out by this project) served to address a need for inclusivity, and were especially effective when they were convened by people outside the traditional deer management community. Participants viewed deer management and venison as a 'minefield', so felt a diversity of perspectives was required to address the problem. Some participants thought new advocates from outside the deer managing community were needed to provide influence, diversify the discourse, and broaden the range and appeal of messaging: advocates, for example, from the food justice sector.

It was noted that the Workshop participants (and deer managing stakeholders more generally) were not very diverse or representative of society more broadly. It was felt that ensuring wider inclusivity across different groups in society is important, particularly if deer managers wanted to engage with urban communities and broaden the appeal of venison. Non-managing participants saw a major challenge in people's perception of venison in relation to socio-economic factors, and were aware that, currently, the audience most receptive to messaging around deer management and venison were predominantly white and middle class. It was suggested that organisations and networks could invest time in understanding how they can design and create communications that reach new audiences; employing multiple angles to contextualise deer management and promote wild venison (e.g., biodiversity restoration, climate change, animal welfare, social and environmental responsibility, local food provision, food citizenship and justice, health benefits). Understanding the markets for venison must also include an awareness of who is excluded.

Some participants felt that increasing inclusivity and diversity was a great idea in theory, but only insofar as it helped the delivery of management objectives ('healthier woodlands and an expansion of the venison market'). Other participants suggested that managers should concentrate their limited capacity on the minority of people who are engaged and interested – that not everyone could, or needed, to be involved. Changes to the Woodlands Grant Scheme could, with development, support the capacity issue for land managers. Currently, the scheme funds capital expenses associated with deer management (e.g., elevated hunting platforms/high seats for stalkers, or fencing to exclude deer) but could be expanded to provide funding for engagement and collaboration activities (including supply chains).

### 3.5.2 New skills and representation

The deer management sector needs to consider how the roles and skillsets involved in managing deer can be made attractive and accessible to new entrants and people seeking rural employment – with a view to shaping the make-up of future countryside workers. For example, there is a lack of butchery skills in relation to venison processing, and these skills were not seen as attractive propositions for young people, particularly from urban backgrounds. It is also worth noting that game dealers and commercial representatives were absent from this Workshop series. There is purportedly an appetite to encourage more women and young people into stalking, but the current organisational and cultural norms of the deer management profession can be an exclusionary space for women, young people and people of colour to join and flourish within. The Fair Game project aims to facilitate women accessing stalking by highlighting that historically the hunting of fallow deer was often undertaken by women, and linked to the Roman goddesses of hunting, Diana and Artemis. Scottish participants highlighted the work of The John Muir Trust in Assynt, who have a specific objective (amongst other community-orientated goals) of facilitating more women entrants to stalking. Similarly, the British Deer Society are keen to diversify the practice to include more women and young people.



### 3.5.3 Cross-sectoral collaboration

Sharing learning, data and evidence between disciplines and across land managers, organisations, institutions, sectors, and communities was considered to be important. Partnerships of conservation and land managing organisations could embrace new collaborators, particularly from different sectors. Some participants felt that if deer management was framed differently and less divisively, this might support landowners to share information more freely, and that stakeholders from different disciplines (e.g., the food justice sector) could contribute to this re-framing. Collaborations between practitioners and academics from the across the range of social sciences and humanities could help to better understand, for example, the dynamics of deer management groups; public perceptions of deer management and venison; and map existing and potential venison markets. Facilitators and community workers have expertise in promoting and facilitating collaboration and mediating conflict. The [Appendix](#) summarises some innovative projects/approaches which could be scaled or replicated.



**Figure 6** A selection of images depicting the participatory activities used during the research process.



# Discussions

## 4. Discussions

Diversifying stakeholder input beyond the land management community resulted in a multi-faceted conversation, going beyond the practical issues faced by deer managers to discussions around the importance and relevance of framing and governance; the historical and contemporary social context; language and communication; participation, diversity, and inclusivity. These are important considerations, as the social context within which land and wildlife management occurs in the UK is changing. The discussion of different values and worldviews by participants in relation to deer management reflects an ongoing change in societal environmental values in western/industrialised countries, characterised by a broad shift from anthropocentric, utilitarian values (nature for us, where nature is valued based on its usefulness for people), towards increasingly ecocentric, mutualistic values (nature and us, where nature is valuable in and of itself; Mace 2014). As reflected in our Workshops, this shift creates a disputed space where values collide, and conflict over the management of land and nature is played out (another example is rewilding, see Drenthen 2018). Deer management sits currently within this space, and deer managers understand the need to embrace new strategies and framings to engage and represent an increasing proportion of the public with mutualistic values (Manfredo et al., 2020). Failure to do so will undermine collaboration potential, limiting managers' abilities to co-ordinate deer management effectively across the landscape.

Participants in the Workshops identified the types of knowledge and data that different stakeholders require in relation to deer management and venison provision. With regards to the integration of different perspectives and knowledges, the Finding the Common Ground initiative in Scotland was highlighted as a progressive process by participants (See [Appendix 4](#)). Another existing example is the Moorland Forum in Scotland, which is a partnership of 27 organisations that engage in matters influencing the uplands of Scotland. Within the Moorland Forum trained facilitators used an approach based on principles of community science, knowledge co-production, knowledge integration (scientific knowledge, and the lived experience of gamekeepers and land managers), and conflict transformation to address contestation over the management of predators and protected species on grouse moors. By gathering stakeholder perceptions to identify where local and scientific knowledge converged and diverged, the group mutually prioritised knowledge gaps and identified future collaborative actions (Ainsworth *et al.*, 2020). This type of approach, and our own, demonstrate the benefit of working across sectors and disciplines, and taking a more participatory approach to untangle controversial environmental management issues, particularly when management involves the lethal control of wildlife. This is important for deer management, as there remain questions for some stakeholders around the rationale for managing deer: how the evidence base for management is derived; what the objectives of management are; and clarification over how interventions are monitored and measured. Without this clarity, deer managers will continue to meet opposition from local communities, such as those reported by practitioners in the South Downs National Park.

To situate our findings within the wider literature, our Workshop insights support and develop the recommendations made by Forest Research's, 'Key Ingredients of Collaborative Management' (Forest Research 2022). These include supporting local leaders; allowing time for trust building; diversifying the voices in the discourse; creating space for knowledge and cultural exchange; and integrating local knowledge with science, using flexible methods such as field observation and collaborative mapping exercises. Importantly, the Workshop identified pathways towards achieving these and demonstrated that stakeholders with different values and priorities in environmental management can coalesce around broader principles of resilience and environmental/social justice.

Our ExCASES process highlights the importance of independent facilitation for these discussions. One of the challenges for existing deer management groups and collectives is a purported lack of independent governance, which leaves them vulnerable to the perception of being unduly influenced/steered by powerful, vested interests. For some stakeholders this has undermined trust and resulted in a reluctance to engage or collaborate with existing initiatives. These perceptions were a factor in some participants' desire to establish a new, cross-sectoral, network, working across disciplines, to promote collaboration (though other participants were simply unaware of existing initiatives). Deer management was characterised in the Workshops as a keystone issue, intersecting ecological, social, economic, and political factors. As such, it is important that deer management initiatives and collaborations reflect this by engaging and including diverse stakeholders in the discourse and practice. The role of gender in these initiatives, and representation within the land management sector, is an important consideration; as collaborations between female stakeholders can lead to more creative and democratic management decisions (Almuna *et al.*, 2022; Gore & Kahler, 2012).





# Recommendations



# 5. Recommendations

We make the following recommendations to support deer and land managers in the development of new strategies and collaborative pathways. What these mean for different sectors is summarised in [Figure 1](#).

## 1. Individuals and organisations involved in managing deer should adopt a holistic, community-orientated framing and approach, which emphasises the interconnectedness of people and nature.

Deer management can be considered a keystone nature renewal issue, meaning that a more holistic approach towards deer management could catalyse transformative change and deliver a cascade of benefits for biodiversity, climate change mitigation objectives, biodiversity renewal, ecosystem health and resilience, food sustainability, nature connection, and rural livelihoods. A community-orientated framing, emphasising social and ecological resilience, can facilitate the establishment of shared objectives and responsibilities between stakeholders with diverse values. We recommend deer managers adopt a framing and approach that:

- Contextualises deer management as necessary for protecting and enhancing the integrity and provision of public goods (e.g., biodiverse, resilient woodlands).
- Positions people as part of nature, with responsibilities.
- Is informed by the historical context of human-deer relationships.
- Supports food sovereignty through local supply chains.
- Increases equity of access to venison.
- Promotes 'less, better meat'.
- Nurtures social cohesion and collaboration.
- Empowers diverse stakeholders through shared learning, experience, and training.
- Provides structures and facilitation support for participation and conflict resolution.
- Proactively engages local communities, raising awareness of environmental issues and providing opportunities for 'hands on' learning and nature connection.



## 2. Deer managing stakeholders should embrace the value of diverse voices and practitioners.

New advocates from outside the deer managing community are needed to provide influence, diversify the discourse, strengthen the socio-economic outcomes, and broaden the range and appeal of messaging to people with different values. Different organisations are trusted partners and messengers for different communities, and working together can maximise reach and benefit. As deer populations and their movements are increasingly connecting rural and urban spaces, bridging a perceived rural/urban divide is important. Furthermore, deer management can be an exclusionary space for women, young people, and people of colour to join and flourish within, which should be addressed. We recommend that deer managing stakeholders:

- Build on existing efforts to diversify the deer management workforce and expand the types of employment opportunities available for people with diverse skillsets (including facilitation, communications, community engagement, woodland management/creation, etc., alongside deer monitoring, stalking, butchery etc),.
- View deer expansion into urban areas as an opportunity to engage new audiences in holistic deer management and to create new markets for venison.
- Engage with concepts such as inter-generational justice to frame discussions around land use and deer management through a forward-looking lens, empowering young people to have a voice in how the environment of their future is managed. This provides an opportunity for conversations exploring future land/environmental governance options that foster authentic re-engagement of people and communities with nature and land management practices.



### 3. Deer managing stakeholders should engage and collaborate more widely with the food justice sector.

Deer managers could foster new partnerships with food justice and re-distribution organisations to help address questions of equity and access around deer management and venison, embedding deer management within wider societal objectives that aim to improve nutrition, food sovereignty, and sustainability. To do this, we recommend that deer management coalitions:

- Collaborate with organisations who can campaign for the role of venison in circular food systems, bypass traditional markets, access novel funding opportunities to overcome supply chain barriers, accelerate access for people otherwise excluded, and help to change perceptions towards venison through positive messaging and engagement with recipient charities and end users.
- Engage with food justice campaigners, like Feedback Global, to ensure deer management and venison are considered in policy-orientated campaigns relating to the future food and agriculture system.

### 4. Stakeholders should share data and promote wider use of (and access to) evidence and experiential knowledge via a dedicated platform.

Mixed methods that provide data on deer populations, impacts, and outcomes, are required to evidence and justify the rationale for deer management at landscape-scales, and to build trust in deer managing operations. Deer managers require data on deer populations and cull returns to evidence management decisions, forecast venison supply flows for venison suppliers, and co-ordinate more effective landscape-scale deer management interventions. Policy makers, public representatives, and community leaders require data-based evidence to be able to advocate for and support deer management. To enable this:

- An independently hosted, open source database should be created that facilitates the collation of anonymised data on deer populations and cull returns, overcoming the current trust issues associated with returning and sharing cull data with statutory bodies.
- Deer managers should recognise the value of, and integrate where appropriate, both scientific evidence and local, experiential knowledge.



## **5. Networks should be established and evolve to embrace new sectors and collaborators.**

Workshop participants requested that new networks establish, and existing networks adapt to develop and organise around, shared principles (see Recommendation 7); integrate different knowledges (scientific and experiential); promote inclusion and interdisciplinarity; exchange information and best practice; cross-fertilise different organisations' initiatives through data sharing and systematic planning; highlight joint funding opportunities; and provide facilitation guidance and resources. Coalitions of stakeholders, representative of a broad spectrum of socio-ecological interests, could create compelling, win-win cases for Local Authority and Government support. To enable this:

- Networks/coalitions should be supported by facilitatory expertise to map stakeholder relationships and existing initiatives (to avoid reinvention and create a continuity of learning), and to facilitate collaborations between stakeholders, and with stakeholders currently outside of deer management.
- Networks should facilitate organisations jointly seeking funding and grant support for deer management, to scale up operations and improve efficacy.
- Practitioners and academics from the social sciences should support collaboration by helping networks/coalitions to understand and navigate conflicts arising over deer management, inform stakeholder engagement and inclusion strategies, provide ethical advice and guidance, and contextualise/frame deer management within wider socio-political and economic considerations.

## **6. It is important to build better trust between organisations, and with wider publics.**

More diverse coalitions representative of a broader range of sectoral interest beyond those of large, well-established land managing organisations, could help to build trust between diverse stakeholders and wider publics. To build trust and confidence in deer management, deer managing stakeholders should:

- Proactively engage in community spaces and with public representatives to demonstrate transparency through the sharing of information (a two-way process), and to develop a shared understanding of the issues.
- Use cohesive communications, based on shared principles (see Recommendation 7).

## **7. Deer managing stakeholders should take a joint ownership approach to communications.**

Joint communications provide a coherent shared narrative; attenuate the perceived risk of negative public/membership responses for any one organisation; increase public confidence in the integrity of messaging; and provide a unified position and compelling case for support from policy makers. In [Box 1](#), we recommend the following co-designed statements and principles, derived from a diverse representation of stakeholders, for use by organisations in their communications around deer management (see [Appendix 3](#) for details of how these were derived from our Workshops).

## 8. Public policy should facilitate and incentivise collaborative deer management.

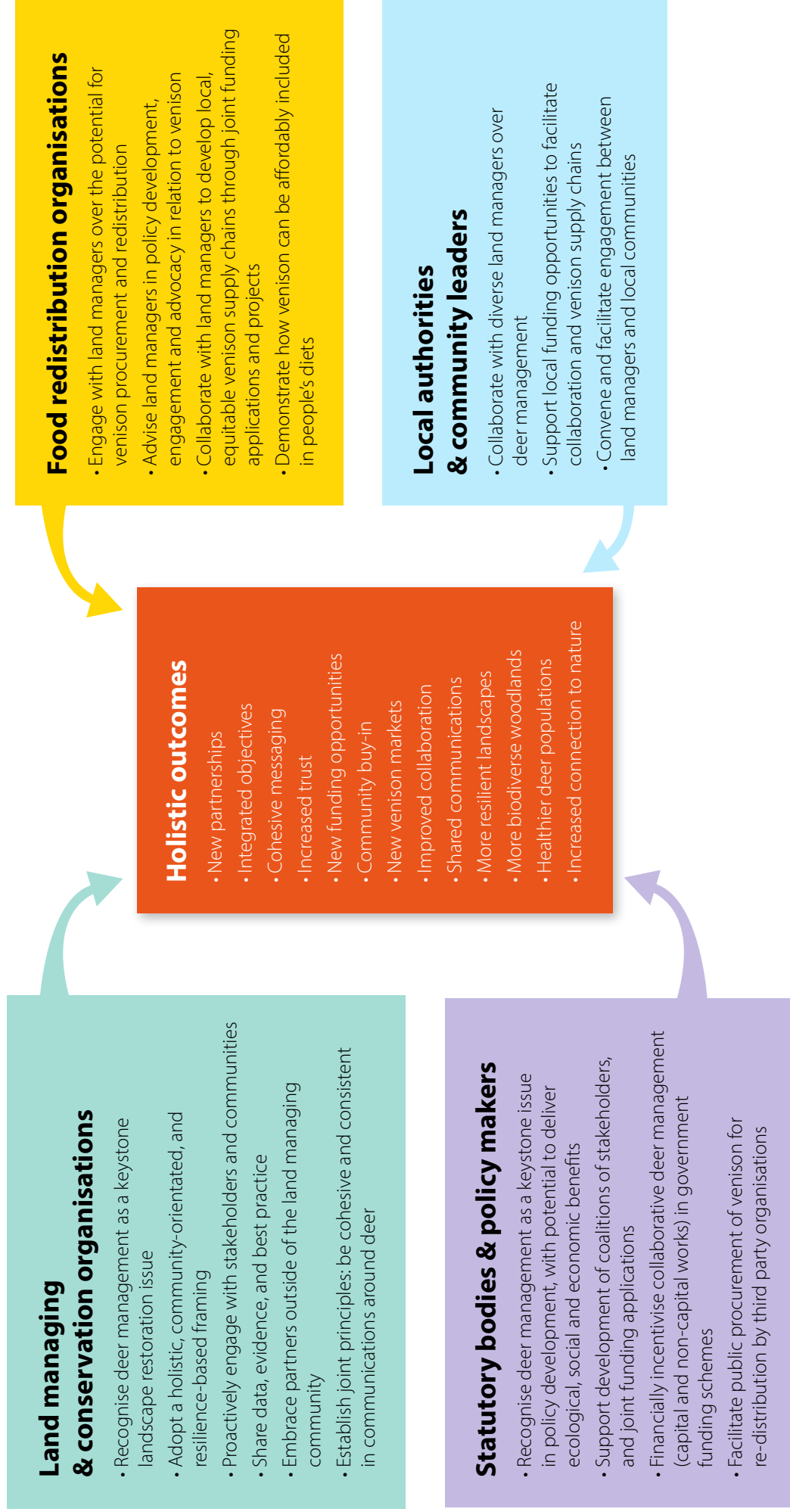
There should be greater connectivity between public policies and initiatives to support landscape-scale deer management and venison supply chains. New funding is particularly needed to support non-capital works such as public engagement, facilitation, data management, and leadership training – creating capacity for deer managers beyond the practical side of management. To enable this:

- Policy makers should recognise deer management as a keystone issue in policy development, with the potential to deliver social, ecological and economic benefits.
- The public procurement of venison should be made available for re-distribution by third sector partners e.g., for use in school meals, NHS Integrated Care Systems, the armed forces, foodbanks, and people suffering food poverty.
- The Woodland Grants Scheme, environmental stewardship schemes (e.g., ELMs), Government Food Strategy, and carbon credits provide opportunities to promote and incentivise collaborative deer management.
- The scope of funding should be expanded to provide for non-capital works; supporting deer managers in public and stakeholder engagement activities and buying out time, or funding support, for facilitating collaborative action between landowners.
- Local Authorities should mobilise income to support enterprises involved in the venison supply chain, justifiable as providing a suite of socio-ecological benefits and supporting the UK Government's Sustainable Development Goals; restoring and protecting ecosystems; supporting local businesses; contributing to food sovereignty and climate change mitigation objectives; and promoting access for people to a sustainable, nutritious, quality food product.



## **Box 1** Principles for use in joint communications between organisations around deer management

- 1** The management of deer populations to sustainable levels – where vegetation and trees can periodically establish and flourish without protection – is important for dynamic nature renewal and climate change mitigation.
- 2** People have coexisted with, and managed, deer populations in Britain for millennia. Evidence-based, proactive deer management is important to support diverse, resilient ecosystems through regulating the abundance and distribution of herbivore pressure.
- 3** Deer management includes a suite of options including non-lethal methods, such as the use of fencing and tree guards (which may be appropriate in some scenarios). Evidence-based culling, by trained professionals following best practice guidelines, is an important and necessary part of deer management.
- 4** There is broad agreement amongst land managers that, in places, a reduction in deer numbers through culling is necessary.
- 5** Deer are a valued part of our ecosystems, and at sustainable densities (that allow the regeneration of plants and trees) can enhance and diversify woodland landscapes.
- 6** Deer management strives to achieve an equitable and sustainable coexistence between people and deer that enables nature renewal.
- 7** The welfare of deer is a priority for deer management, and effective deer management supports the overall health of deer populations.
- 8** Wild venison is a quality product of positive environmental management/stewardship. A more accessible wild venison supply chain could be part of a dietary transition that supports local, sustainable, healthy and just food provision.
- 9** Taking a community-orientated approach allows us to highlight the wider socio-cultural benefits that sustainable deer management can provide.
- 10** The focus of deer management has changed over time, becoming a key objective for conservation initiatives and evidence-based land management.



**Figure 1** What do these recommendations mean for your organisation?



We hope that the findings and recommendations from this work contribute to, and support, collaborative approaches towards the management of deer populations in the UK. More broadly, we hope that this work demonstrates the opportunities for adopting more inclusive, deliberative and participatory approaches towards environmental management; empowering stakeholders, building trust, and creating new collaborative opportunities which could lead to more creative and equitable management decisions. Ultimately, this might lead to greater acceptability and perceived legitimacy of deer management amongst diverse stakeholders and wider publics.





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# Appendix

# Appendix

## 1: Methods

This table summarises the participatory Workshop process, aims and methods/activities.

Participatory Process Summary		
Process element	Aims	Methods / Activities Designed by the team, utilising participatory methods (Newing 2011, Dialogue Matters handbook)
Workshop 1 (June) and Workshop 2 (July)	<p>Create space for diverse stakeholders to interact and increase their understanding of each other's roles, priorities, values and worldviews in relation to deer management and how it connects to ecological restoration, biodiversity, food and land justice.</p> <p>Discuss different angles on and framing of deer management.</p> <p>Explore areas of convergence and divergence in ideals about future human-deer coexistence across landscapes.</p>	<p><b>Group Working Agreement:</b> participants spoke in pairs about a time when they felt heard, respected and understood and what helped in this situation; followed by sharing what they needed from this space to feel heard, respected, understood, engaged and able to share their perspectives/experience. These were combined into a group agreement everyone agreed to adhere to.</p> <p><b>Statement Continuum:</b> we created a continuum of 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' spanning the length of the space. Facilitators read out preprepared statements and participants placed themselves on the line to indicate their point of view. Lively, in-depth conversations about values, priorities, worldviews, and perspectives followed, prompted by where people were stood.</p> <p><b>Ranking Exercise:</b> groups were given cards of 'main barriers and challenges in deer management' to rank. The card content was derived in advance from the scoping conversations. Groups chose to organise the cards in different ways – focusing on complexity, importance and urgency or a combination of factors.</p> <p><b>Future landscape visioning:</b> using the prompt "the ideal future of landscape-scale, human-deer co-existence in the UK" participants were asked to create an aspirational 'vision'. This could take the form of a map, annotated base-picture, mind-map or otherwise to depict an idealised landscape/situation. They could add drawings, collage, symbols, words, Lego, etc. to communicate their collective ideal future scenario(s).</p>

## Participatory Process Summary

Process element	Aims	Methods / Activities Designed by the team, utilising participatory methods (Newing 2011, Dialogue Matters handbook)
Evening event (September)	<p>Create an immersive learning experience with a 'deer unmaking' butchery demonstration.</p> <p>Hold a panel showcasing and discussing novel work mission participants are doing on deer management.</p>	<p><b>Deer Unmaking:</b> this is a reimagining of a medieval tradition designed and facilitated by one of the participating academics from the University of Exeter. It has previously been used for public engagement and education. A young fallow deer was butchered by a participant from the Forestry Commission alongside a narration providing the socio-cultural, political and economic history of fallow deer hunting and venison in England. In the original tradition, different parts of the carcass are distributed to the community, which we replicated at the end of Workshop 3.</p> <p><b>Presentations and panel discussion:</b> Participants from three organisations doing novel work in deer management – iDeer, Sussex Woods, and The Country Food Trust – gave short presentations sharing insights and learning from their projects. This was followed by a panel Q&amp;A.</p>
Workshop 3 (September)	<p>Identify opportunities for co-ordinating, building trust, sharing information, and democratising decision making on deer and wider land management.</p> <p>Explore 'commoning' and how far this might be useful framing for deer management.</p> <p>Discuss communication messaging and find consensus which could be used for co-ordinated public-facing communication about deer in the future.</p>	<p><b>Carousel group discussions:</b> Three discussion stations were set up around the room. Three groups of participants had 25 minutes to discuss their topic and longlist ideas for moving forward. They then moved to the next station and built on what the first group had written. Finally, the groups rotated again. By the end, all participants had contributed to each thematic station. The stations were based on emergent themes from the first two Workshops:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>i.</b> connectivity at a landscape-scale – relationships, governance, networks and sharing information/data;</li> <li><b>j.</b> commoning venison and deer – framing deer as a commons, making venison more accessible and fair;</li> <li><b>k.</b> diversity, values, trust and inclusivity – how to build trust between different stakeholders, addressing EDI issues, making deer management and venison more socially just</li> </ul> <p><b>Joint communications scoreboard:</b> each group was given 14 statements, drawn from commonalities in Workshops 1 and 2, and a scoreboard chart. Participants considered the acceptability of the statements/principles from their organisations' point of view, and whether they felt their organisation would use and/or endorse the principles in their communications. These perspectives were captured using a traffic light scoring system indicating strong acceptability/agreement/organisational endorsement (green) through to strong unacceptability/disagreement/non-endorsement (red). Colours between (yellows and oranges) indicate areas of specific change that would enable the organisation to endorse the statement and blue was 'ambiguous/not relevant'. The activity highlighted areas of contention and divergence, and what it would take to move towards alignment.</p>



# Appendix

## 2: Stakeholder representation

This table provides a full list of organisations and institutions identified during stakeholder mapping. Some organisations hold more than one 'perspective'. Stakeholders who participated in scoping conversations are indicated by an \*. Stakeholders that participated in the Workshop series are indicated with a †.

Perspectives	Key Institutions/Organisations/Individuals
<b>Deer management practitioners</b>	*†Forestry Commission, *†Natural England (NE), *NatureScot, *Association of Deer Management Groups, *†Deer Initiative, †British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC), British Deer Society, *John Muir Trust, †Woodland Trust, *†National Trust, †NE Sussex Woods Deer Management pilot project, Knepp Estate, local private estates (†Goodwood Estate), †wildlife veterinarian, †farmers, †deer stalkers
<b>Conservation NGOs</b>	*†National Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Wildlife Trusts (†Sussex Wildlife Trust), †Woodland Trust, *John Muir Trust, *Scottish Environment Link
<b>Statutory bodies</b>	*†Forestry Commission, *†Natural England, *NatureScot, Natural Resources Wales, Highways England, Network Rail, *Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), *†South Downs National Park Authority
<b>Agriculture</b>	*DEFRA, †local farmers, National Farmers Union (NFU), Land Workers Alliance (LWA)
<b>Forestry and Woodland Management</b>	*†Forestry Commission, †Woodland Trust, *Forest Research, *Community Woodlands Association
<b>Landowners</b>	Including the NGOs, statutory bodies, private estates etc in above categories
<b>Academics</b>	*Forest Research (inc. University of Bangor), *†University of Exeter, *University of the Highlands and Islands, *†RENEW, *Finding the Common Ground (inc. University of Edinburgh), †iDeer (University of Reading)
<b>Just transition</b>	Common Weal, Shared Assets, †Feedback Global, LWA
<b>Venison and food justice</b>	*†National Trust, *†The Country Food Trust, South Downs Vension, †Fareshare, †Feedback Global, Land Workers Alliance, local food partnerships
<b>Animal rights</b>	Onekind, Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Animal Rebellion, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)
<b>Independent consultants/ experts</b>	†Wildlife veterinarian, *†Scottish deer management consultants, †Environmental Dialogue Broker, †local deer managers
<b>Local authority and democracy</b>	†West Sussex County Council, Adur and Worthing Ward Councillor, †Goodwood Ward Councillor, †Arundel Council Ward councillor, New Citizenship, Involve
<b>Future generations</b>	*†RENEW, Welsh Government Office of the Future Generations Commissioner
<b>Green finance</b>	Financial partners of the RENEW project

# Appendix

## 3: 'Joint Communications' analysis summary

Following Workshops 1 and 2, a set of statements with principles were derived by theExCASES team. These statements reflected the input from participants engaged in the first two Workshops. The statements were deliberately unrefined and open to interpretation, as one of the objectives for their use in Workshop 3 was to explore the different ways they were perceived by participants, and to identify gaps and 'red zones' (areas of contention and divergence amongst participants), as well as consensus. The statements were presented to participants, discussed, and refined during a facilitated activity. Participants were specifically asked to consider the acceptability of the statements/principles from their organisation's point of view, and whether they felt their organisation would use and/or endorse the principles in their communications. Facilitators used a traffic light system for each participant (presented in the table below), for each statement, where green was 'acceptable/would endorse'; yellow was 'acceptable/would endorse, subject to specific changes'; and red was 'unacceptable/would not endorse'. Participants were also offered a blue option for 'ambiguous/not relevant'.

The initial statements, derived from the first workshops, are presented below (A statements), followed by a concise summary of their discussion by participants, and the refined statement (B statements). In the final set of principles and recommendations, B6 was not included; B9 and B10 were combined; and the emphasis on a historical perspective in B12 was felt to be inherent in B2. The table at the end of the Appendix shows a summary of the participating organisations' views on the original statements (A statements) during the workshop.

### ***A1: Explaining the environmental importance of deer management for healthy woodlands, ecosystems, biodiversity renewal and climate change.***

Participants agreed with the sentiment of this statement, but with a caveat that more detail was required around why deer management was important for these objectives. 'Nature' was perceived to be a more tractable term for a public audience than 'biodiversity'.

B1: The management of deer populations to sustainable levels – where vegetation and trees can periodically establish and flourish without protection – is important for dynamic nature renewal and climate change mitigation.

### ***A2: Deer management can play a positive ecological role by being part of, and replicating, natural processes within ecological systems (in the absence of predators).***

There was broad agreement that deer management fulfils a natural process, but a reluctance amongst land managing participants to explicitly mention predators; it was felt this would connect deer management practices to the rewilding discourse, which was perceived as inflammatory. It was also requested that the statement be amended to remove a perceived human/nature binary, and to re-orientate the statement around the historical role that people have played in managing deer populations.

B2: People have coexisted with, and managed, deer populations in Britain for millennia. Evidence-based, proactive deer management is important to support diverse, resilient ecosystems through regulating the abundance and distribution of herbivore pressure.

**A3: 'Deer Management' includes a suite of options of which killing deer is one.**

Participants did not like to use the word 'killing', and preferred culling over lethal control. Deer managers stressed that there should be emphasis on this being evidence-based and following best practice guidance, while it was felt important to highlight the level of professionalism of stalkers – that the great majority of deer are killed cleanly and without suffering. Managers also felt that while it should be made clear that there are non-lethal methods used in deer management, there needs to be honesty that culling is necessary in places to reduce deer abundance and density.

B3: Deer management includes a suite of options including non-lethal methods, such as the use of fencing and tree guards. Evidence-based culling, by trained professionals following best practice guidelines, is an important and necessary part of deer management.

**A4: Deer perform an ecological role, helping maintain balanced woodlands and mosaic landscapes.**

This statement was generally acceptable to non-land managing participants who appreciated that it ascribed intrinsic value to deer as part of the ecosystem. For the land managing participants, the concept of balance was felt to be too subjective and unrealistic. There was discussion over whether deer did indeed help maintain healthy woodlands, with the overriding view that this depended on density and species assemblage (participants settling on 'can enhance' over 'helping maintain'). There was much discussion around which species are referred to under the blanket term 'deer', and debate around the relative value and desirability of native versus non-native species (and species such as fallow deer, which have been naturalised over the last 1500 years). Participants concluded that incorporating consideration of different species into this statement would make it an overly complex message, while the relative value of different species to different people is a divisive issue.

B4: Deer are a valued part of our ecosystems, and at sustainable densities (that allow the regeneration of plants and trees) can enhance and diversify woodland landscapes.

**A5: Emphasising the objective of achieving a balanced human-deer-ecosystem coexistence.**

Participants felt the emphasis on holism, and an objective for sustainable coexistence, was desirable, but that the language was unclear and confusing and the statement overly complex. Generally, participants liked the implication of an equitable relationship in the word coexistence. However, contrary to the intention of the statement, some participants felt that the wording emphasised a division between people and nature. Again, the term 'balance' was contested by land managing participants, who preferred 'sustainable'.

B5: Deer management strives to achieve an equitable and sustainable co-existence between people and deer that enables nature renewal.

**A6: Deer management is not about eradication or pest control.**

Participants felt that 'pest' was too pejorative, and a highly politicised word associated with the right-wing media (in the discourse around immigration, for example). However, there was some debate that particular species of deer, such as muntjac and Chinese water deer, are regarded and treated as pests by deer managers, while deer could be officially classed as pests if they caused, for example, a high degree of damage to crops. That said, none of the deer managing participants have, or would use, the word pest on communications - it was felt that 'pest' should be avoided altogether, irrespective of context.

B6: Deer management is not about eradicating deer.



**A7: Deer management is important for deer welfare.**

This was a divisive statement for participants. Deer managing, and some non-deer managing participants, readily accepted that deer welfare is a priority, with deer managers stressing that it is effective, quality deer management that is positive for deer welfare. However, some non-deer managing participants felt that the statement was false; that it was ‘the kind of argument that sport hunters used to justify killing’. It was perceived that the distinction between individual deer health and deer population health would not be made by the public, while any management activity had an implicit welfare implication for individual deer (e.g., getting caught in fencing; exclusion from shelter; deer that are not cleanly shot).

B7: The welfare of deer is a priority for deer management, and effective deer management supports the overall health of deer populations.

**A8: There is a broad consensus amongst land use sectors that deer management is necessary.**

There was discussion about who the land use sectors were in this statement (i.e., inclusive of leisure, tourism, outdoor sports etc.), and with this in mind, whether the statement was accurate. Participants preferred ‘land managers’, though there was some comment that this might be exclusionary. Though agreeing with the thrust of the statement, some participants questioned whether there was a legitimate consensus – whether this had been evidenced. If not, ‘consensus’ could not be used by some organisations, particularly statutory bodies. Deer managing participants felt that the focus of the message must be on the necessity to reduce deer numbers – which is a different emphasis to ‘management’.

B8: There is broad agreement amongst land managers that, in places, a reduction in deer numbers through culling is necessary.

**A9: A more equitable wild venison supply chain could facilitate a dietary transition that supports local, sustainable, healthy and just food provision.**

Food justice participants supported the message, but impressed that the role of venison, in supporting food justice and facilitating dietary transition, should not be overplayed – that food sovereignty and justice were big, complex issues with no easy fixes. Deer managing participants felt more comfortable supporting the message if 'equitable' was changed to 'accessible'.

B9: A more accessible wild venison supply chain could be part of a dietary transition that supports local, sustainable, healthy and just food provision.

**A10: Wild venison is a positive byproduct of environmental management/stewardship.**

Participants felt that 'byproduct' implied waste, whereas venison is a quality product. It was also highlighted that byproduct has a specific technical definition within management, which was not appropriate for venison (referring to the gralloch/gut and inedible body parts). Some participants felt that the sentence should be more specific, that venison is a 'product of deer management/stewardship', but it was highlighted that deer management is nested within environmental management, which has more holistic connotations and broader appeal.

B10: Wild venison is a quality product of positive environmental management/stewardship.

**A11: Taking a 'commoning' approach to deer management allows us to highlight the ecological relationships between humans and deer, in the present and future (beyond land managers performing population control).**

This was the most problematic and least supported statement, with participants generally feeling that it was too soon to talk about commoning, which they perceived as an aspirational concept (and by no means unanimously supported), within a joint communications piece. Participants found the statement too complex and esoteric – too academic. Deer managing stakeholders felt it wasn't necessarily desirable to advance a commoning narrative for deer management at this stage; that it was not easy to understand, would raise too many questions, and would put some people off. A food justice representative felt that while they supported the commoning ethos, for their organisation, a more helpful and compelling communications piece would focus on tackling the issue from the other end; taking what is perceived as a luxury product and providing it to people in need. That the rebelliousness of this framing was attractive. There was broad support for the emphasis however, with a preference for wording that implied 'community orientated', 'common good' or 'communal', rather than commoning.

B11: Taking a community-orientated approach allows us to highlight the wider sociocultural benefits that sustainable deer management can provide.

***A12: Taking a 'deep time perspective' contextualises the current and historical relationships between people, deer, food and communities.***

Participants felt that 'deep time' was too ambiguous, and simply preferred historical. It was voiced that basing management on historical practices was not necessarily desirable, given that people used to use inhumane traps and persecute protected wildlife. The response from other participants was that the key word is 'contextualise'; that a historical perspective helps us to better understand the contemporary situation, not guide management decisions. Food justice participants, not having a background in land management and conservation, found the historical narrative very engaging and useful in contextualising the venison side of the deer management conversation.

B12: A historical perspective helps us to contextualise the past and current relationships between people, deer, food, and communities.

***A13: Highlighting the shift away from recreational stalking as the preserve of the wealthy towards a key objective of conservation/ecosystem restoration initiatives.***

This statement caused much debate and divergence of opinion, based around the reference to recreational stalking and wealth. Deer managing participants did not like the class connotations, which they felt were irrelevant, and were keen to not dismiss recreational stalkers who they perceive as playing an important and valued role in deer management. This was reiterated by other participants, who felt that the message, as it reads, could be divisive. Non deer managing participants perceived that the public, generally, do associate hunting with class and wealth, and that highlighting a shift in focus away from this was necessary, but they were keen not to ostracise recreational stalkers. In relation to this, deer managers preferred a 'change of focus' over 'shift away', and to highlight the emergence of an evidence-led approach. Land managing participants preferred 'land management' to 'conservation/ecosystem restoration', as this was perceived to be more inclusive of land use activities where the primary focus was not conservation, such as food production.

B13: The focus of deer management has changed over time, becoming a key objective for conservation initiatives and evidence-based land management.



## Summary of the communications activity: 'Exploring a blueprint for a joint communications piece'

This activity took place in Workshop 3 (September) with 24 participants. The aim was to provide an overview of organisations' willingness to publicly communicate certain principles (as part of a hypothetical joint initiative) by discussing and rating different communications messages identified in Workshop 1. A traffic light key was used to express the following:

**Green = agree with in principle, Yellow = agree with caveats, Orange = substantive reservation, Red = disagree, Blue = not applicable or relevant to the organisation**

Statements	Statutory organisations			Conservation organisations			Private landowners			Local councillors			Special interest experts			Environment and food charities			Academia					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
<b>1.</b> Explaining the <b>environmental importance</b> of deer management for healthy woodlands, ecosystems, biodiversity renewal and climate change																								
<b>2.</b> Deer management can play a <b>positive ecological role</b> by being part of, and replicating, natural processes within ecological systems (in the absence of predators)																								
<b>3.</b> ' <b>Deer management</b> ' includes a suite of options of which killing deer is one																								
<b>4.</b> Deer perform an <b>ecological role</b> , helping maintain balanced woodlands and mosaic landscapes																								
<b>5.</b> Emphasising the objective of achieving a <b>balanced</b> human-deer ecosystem coexistence																								
<b>6.</b> Deer management <b>isn't</b> about eradication or pest control																								
<b>7.</b> Deer management is important for <b>deer welfare</b>																								
<b>8.</b> There is a broad consensus amongst land use sectors that <b>deer management is necessary</b>																								
<b>9.</b> A <b>joint communications</b> piece across multiple organisations would be helpful																								
<b>10.</b> A more <b>equitable wild venison supply chain</b> could facilitate a dietary transition that supports local, sustainable, healthy and just food provision																								
<b>11.</b> <b>Wild venison</b> is a positive byproduct of environmental management/stewardship																								
<b>12.</b> Taking a ' <b>commoning</b> ' approach to deer management allows us to highlight the ecological relationships between humans and deer, in the present and future (beyond land managers performing population control)																								
<b>13.</b> Taking a ' <b>deep time perspective</b> ' contextualises the current and historical relationships between people, deer, food, and communities																								
<b>14.</b> Highlighting the shift away from recreational <b>stalking</b> as the preserve of the wealthy towards a key objective for conservation/ecosystem restoration initiatives																								

# Appendix

## 4: Resources

This resources section does not represent an exhaustive repository, but rather highlights the organisations and initiatives that were prominent or recommended by participants during our participatory process. They are organised under five headings.

### 1. Training and best practise deer management guidance

Best Practice Guidance, Scotland: [Welcome - Best Practice Guidance \(bestpracticeguides.org.uk\)](https://bestpracticeguides.org.uk)

British Association for Shooting and Conservation: [Deer Management - BASC](https://www.basc.org.uk)

British Deer Society: [The British Deer Society \(bds.org.uk\)](https://www.bds.org.uk)

Deer Initiative Ltd, Best Practise Guidance: [Best practice guides | The Deer Initiative](https://www.deerinitiative.org.uk)

Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust: [Deer management - Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust \(gwct.org.uk\)](https://www.gwct.org.uk)

### 2. Venison & food sustainability

British Quality Wild Venison Standard: [British Quality Wild Venison - Quality assurance for British Wild Venison](https://www.britishqualitywildvenison.com)

Red Tractor Certified Standards: [Our Standards | Red Tractor](https://www.redtractor.com)

Scottish Quality Wild Venison Standard: [Scottish Quality Wild Venison | Audit & Certification | Intertek SAI Global \(saiassurance.co.uk\)](https://www.sqvwv.com)

Country Food Trust: [The Country Food Trust - Charity](https://www.countryfoodtrust.org.uk)

FareShare: [FareShare Cost of Living Crisis Appeal - FareShare](https://www.fareshare.org.uk)

Feedback Global: [Home - Feedback \(feedbackglobal.org\)](https://www.feedbackglobal.org)

Food Matters: [Home - Food Matters](https://www.foodmatters.org.uk)

Sustainable Food Places: [Home | Sustainable Food Places](https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.com)

### 3. Networks

Association of Deer Management Groups, Scotland: [ADMG – Association of Deer Management Groups \(deer-management.co.uk\)](https://www.admg.co.uk)

Deer Initiative Ltd: [The Deer Initiative - managing wild deer population in England and Wales](https://www.deerinitiative.org.uk)

Farm Clusters: [Farmer Clusters - For farmers, facilitators and advisors](https://www.farmclusters.com)

Northern Ireland Environment Link: [Northern Ireland Environment Link \(nienvironmentlink.org\)](https://www.nienvironmentlink.org)

Scottish Environment Link: [Welcome - Scotlink](https://www.scotlink.org.uk)

Wales Environment Link: [Home - Wales Environment Link \(waleslink.org\)](https://www.waleslink.org)

Wildlife and Countryside Link: [Environment Links UK - Wildlife and Countryside Link \(wcl.org.uk\)](https://www.wcl.org.uk)





#### 4. Initiatives & facilitation tools

Centre for Good Relations: [Centre for Good Relations - Civic Mediation - HOME HOME](#)

Dama International Project, University of Nottingham: [Dama International: Fallow deer - The University of Nottingham](#)

iDeer, University of Reading: [Project iDeer - A tool for strategic woodland creation and deer management in England and Wales \(reading.ac.uk\)](#)

Dialogue Matters (stakeholder facilitation and dialogue): [Homepage: Dialogue Matters - Dialogue Matters](#)

Involve (public participation and deliberation): [Involve](#)

**The Fair Game Project:** This is a collaborative initiative between the University of Exeter, South Downs National Park Authority, Natural England's Sussex Woods Pilot Project, National Trust, British Deer Society, local food network representatives, and Fareshare. The project aims to, 1) foster a more diverse demographic for deer stalkers by providing deer management and game hygiene courses, aimed at younger people and women, 2) establish communal infrastructure for the storage and supply of venison carcasses, 3) create a new 'Virtuous Venison' brand for redistribution via the food charity FareShare and 4), provide an engaging communication strategy (animated film and pop-up exhibitions) that explains the history of fallow deer, the need to cull them and the societal benefits of their venison.

**Finding the Common Ground,** Scottish Environment Link: [The Common Ground Forum](#); a joint venture between the Association of Deer Management Groups and Scottish Environment LINK. The initiative intends to develop better relations across the deer sector in upland Scotland to find shared solutions that support the implementation of the Scottish Government's action in the light of their response to the Deer Working Group. The initiative has been innovative in working with the Centre for Good Relations, a not-for-profit company that facilitates dialogue, working through issues of contention and dispute to address social conflicts and tensions.

Forest Research, Key Ingredients of Collaborative Management: [Key ingredients of collaborative \(deer\) management \(forestresearch.gov.uk\)](#)

**The Portable Antiquities Scheme:** [Welcome to the Portable Antiquities Scheme Website \(finds.org.uk\)](#). When faced with a similar issue around data sharing and reporting, the British Museum and Amgueddfa Cymru (Museum Wales) set up the world leading Portable Antiquities Scheme, whereby members of the public could anonymously register archaeological findings. These records greatly advanced an understanding and knowledge of artefacts significant to the history and archaeology of Wales and England.

The Moorland Forum: [Moorland Forum - Home](#)

Social Ecological Systems framework, European Commission: [untitled \(europa.eu\)](#)

## 5. Principles of commoning in action

Participants in Workshop 3 highlighted that there are several examples where the principles of commoning are already being applied to deer management, and that these can be replicated and/or scaled up.

- The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) promote community involvement in deer management and encourage recreational stalkers to supply venison to local markets ([Deer Management – BASC Deer](#)). BASC facilitate the sharing of learning and skills, provide training, and enable access for entrant stalkers to mentors.
- The Woodland Trust has a community project in Loch Arkaig where they have established a local larder. The venison from their deer management is either distributed within the community or sold, the profit being recycled back into management operations.
- Since 2021, Forestry England have been providing venison to local hospitals and schools in East Lancashire, while The Country Food Trust procures venison from organisations such as Forestry England, processes the meat into an easily usable and nonperishable form (e.g., mince), and supplies food banks throughout Britain ([The Country Food Trust – Charity](#)).
- Both the John Muir Trust (Assynt) and NatureScot (Craig Meagaidh) have initiatives to train community members to stalk deer on their ground, providing local larders and integrating community groups into active management of the land.
- The John Muir Trust proactively provides opportunities for women entrants to stalking and has run engagement around deer management and ecological restoration for local school groups. This includes field excursions, cooking demonstrations, and the introduction of venison into school dinners.



## ExCASES Mission

# Seeing the Forest for the Deer

## How stakeholder collaboration can improve landscape-scale deer management

ExCASES is a 'solutions generator' designed to tackle issues facing biodiversity renewal that are not covered by RENEW's four core themes. It provides an agile, flexible mechanism to work collaboratively with partners, researchers, and organisations from diverse sectors on focused topics. This cross-cutting theme is run by an interdisciplinary team of researchers based at the National Trust and the University of Exeter.

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